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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000105

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: THE TURKMEN ARCHIPELAGO: A FORMER PRISONER
RECOUNTS LOCAL PRISON CONDITIONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR TRACEY JACOBSON FOR REASONS 1.4 B,D.

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On December 30, 2005 and January 4, 2006, Charge and Conoff met with Reuben Agabekyan, a former prominent ethnic Armenian businessman who was released in December 2005 after having served several years in prison on dubious charges, (and) who was seeking Post's assistance in helping him immigrate to America. During the course of the conversation, Agabekyan recounted his experiences in prison: how he was convicted, prison conditions, alleged physical abuse and torture, as well as how he managed to survive. Agabekyan also informed Emboffs that he had seen several high profile ex-GOTX officials in several prisons. Although post cannot state whether or not he was guilty of any crimes, Agabekyan's statements provide post with a better understanding of conditions inside Turkmenistan's penal system. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) Reuben Agabekyan, a middle-aged ethnic-Armenian businessman, was a prominent businessman who imported car parts and tires from Turkey and the United States in the early to mid-90s. He opened two businesses, one of which is registered in the United States. In 1999, Agabekyan was driving his car and cut off another car that happened to be driven by then Presidential Press Secretary Kakamurad Baliyev. Police soon arrested and detained Agabekyan without charges. He was later charged with threatening to commit murder (based upon the "confession" of a neighbor who claimed that Agabekyan had wanted to kill somebody) and sentenced to one year in prison. The authorities later destroyed one of his houses, confiscated his property, and convicted him of embezzlement, adding an additional ten years to his sentence. In December 2005, his sentence was cut by four years and he was released. He is currently out on parole.

¶3. (C) Agabekyan met with Conoff per the request of Armenia's Ambassador, who knows Agabekyan well (probably through their shared ethnicity and Agabekyan's business reputation). Agabekyan repeatedly expressed fear that the authorities were still after him, claiming that his contacts in the government said that the head of the Presidential Security Service was personally handling his case. He wants asylum in the United States, where he has several cousins.

THE TURKMEN ARCHIPELAGO

14. (C) Agabekyan recalled to Conoff his experiences in Turkmenistan's prison system where he served time in several prisons, including Owadan Depe, a prison outside of Ashgabat considered to be one of the worst in Turkmenistan. Agabekyan said that authorities sent him to Owadan Depe for six months in 2001 in order to force him to confess to his involvement in the murder of one of Agabekyan's former employees which occurred while Agabekyan was in prison. During his time in Owadan Depe, Agabekyan said prison authorities (under the direction of the MNB) deprived him of food, as well as beat and tortured him. Later, the prison staff subjected Agabekyan to electric shock by attaching wires to his ears, as well as attaching him to an old-fashioned wind up telephone that would shock him when wound. (Note: Khoja Adjayev, the MNB officer directing the torture, was later sent to prison for unknown reasons. End Note.) While in Owadan Depe, he lost over 25 kilograms and was later hospitalized in Tejen, where he continued to serve out his sentence.

15. (C) Agabekyan described prison life as being extremely harsh for those who did not have the means to fend for themselves, i.e., access to cash to bribe prison guards and authorities. Using money stashed away and delivered to him by frequent visits by one of his common-law wives (he has two), Agabekyan was able to buy off prison officials who helped him obtain food and other items. He said that he "bought his life with all the money" he brought in. He added that for many prisoners, their only source of nourishment and sustenance are care packages from home, as the porridge served in prisons lacked any nutritional value.

16. (C) Throughout his imprisonment, Agabekyan saw several prominent former government officials who had been imprisoned

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by the regime. Among them were:

Jurakoly Babakuliyev, Former Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Ministers;

Said Gandimov, Former Head of the Central Bank;

Imam Gandimov, Former Head of the State Bank;

Anadurdi Paljayev, Former Head of InvestBank;

Pukuli Tanarkuliyev, a prominent academic who has since been released;

Parkhat Yklymov, younger brother of alleged assassination plotter Saparmurat Yklymov. (Both are now living in Sweden);

Ashyrberdi Chukezov, former hakim (mayor) of Ashgabat;

Kurban Welmuradov, former Head of the Ministry of Water Resources;

A mid-20's nephew of presumed ringleader of the 2002 assassination plot Boris Shikhmuradov. The nephew was described as being in "very bad condition."

17. (C) When asked if he would be willing to provide the names of those prison officers involved in abusive acts against prisoners, Agabekyan, visibly nervous, demurred, noting that those perpetrating such acts were "marked men" already. Those who could manage to leave Turkmenistan would most certainly be targeted by relatives of those they abused, adding that he himself relished the idea of meeting one of his tormentors. Interestingly, he said that by and large, he got along well with most prison officials, mostly because of the bribes he paid them to ensure his well-being in prison.

COMMENT

18. (C) There is no way for us to ascertain the true cause of Agabekyan's legal woes as corruption is endemic in Turkmenistan's business circles, as is the regular imprisonment of those who have fallen afoul of the regime. Armenian Consul Artak Kalachyan told Conoff that Agabekyan may very well have upset someone in the regime over some of his business activities, and that his problems were in no way politically related. However, Agabekyan's commentary about his experience in several of Turkmenistan's prisons provides us with a rare and disturbing snapshot of what life is like "on the inside." As the GOTX continues to refuse prison access to foreign embassies and international agencies, chance encounters like this one will continue to serve as our only insight into Turkmenistan's penal system. END COMMENT.
JACOBSON